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The Good Neighbourhood

Book Review of Jane Jacobs,
The Death and Life of Great American Cities

By Hans Blumenfeld

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Albert Rose

The Good Neighbourhood

Hans Blumenfeld

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTELLIGENCER	133
THE CHARTERED ACCOUNTANT AS ADULT EDUCATOR	136
<i>Peter F. Oliphant, C.A.</i>	
LIVING WITH TELEVISION	140
<i>Clifford Brown with Louis Hausman</i>	
ENSEMBLE	145
<i>J. Roby Kidd</i>	
EDUCATION FOR COMMUNITY LIVING	149
<i>Albert Rose</i>	
THE GOOD NEIGHBOURHOOD	162
<i>Hans Blumenfeld</i>	
'HOW SHALL I READ THIS BOOK?'	170
<i>Alfred Kazin</i>	
LEARNING AND WORKING - 3	177
<i>A. V. Pigott</i>	

THE GOOD NEIGHBOURHOOD

Hans Blumenfeld

"This book is an attack on current city planning and rebuilding", says the opening sentence of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.^{*} It is an angry book. Like other reformers and prophets the author combines a great wealth of sharp observations and sensitive understanding with sweeping generalizations and dangerously oversimplified recipes. The strange title — putting death before life — indicates the lopsided approach to the problems of the city. Mrs. Jacobs, an active citizen of Greenwich Village, is concerned exclusively with the inner areas of great cities, because, as she correctly states, they have been "evaded in planning theory". What concerns her is that they have not been evaded in practice, but are being ruthlessly destroyed in the name of "slum clearance" and "urban redevelopment". Having opposed the concept of "urban redevelopment" since 1939, as it developed in the United States and is now spreading to Canada, I am naturally biased in favour of a book that opposes it far more effectively than I have been able to do.

Rather strangely, Jane Jacobs never clearly spells out the basic fallacy of "slum clearance". Slums are bad, not because they look unpleasant or because they prevent land from being put to its so-called "highest and best use", but because people are forced to live in them under conditions impairing their health and happiness. They live there because they cannot afford better housing. In order to enable them to afford it, either their income must be raised or rents (or prices) for decent housing must be lowered. Tearing down slums does neither. To the contrary, it takes a slice out of their money income — and often an enormous slice out of their "psychic income" — by forcing them to move; and, by decreasing the supply of low-rent housing, it raises its price (or rent). If clearance proceeds wholesale, it invariably also destroys a sizeable number of acceptable houses. We need more old houses, not less (in addition to many more new houses). "Slum clearance" as Mrs. Jacobs rightly remarks, does not abolish slums, it shifts and spreads them.

What holds true of dwellings, holds equally true of industrial, commercial, and service establishments. Here Mrs. Jacobs brilliantly analyzes the need of a great variety of such establishments for cheap premises which they can find only in old buildings. In particular, she protests with full justification against the ruthless destruction of small

^{*}The *Death and Life of Great American Cities*: Jane Jacobs, Random House, pp. 448. \$7.50.

neighbourhood stores who are deprived, without compensation, of their capital invested in building up "goodwill", and who usually cannot re-establish themselves elsewhere. She overlooks that tenants, whether of dwellings or of stores, are daily evicted without compensation by private landlords. Public slum clearance accepts at least some responsibility for the fate of its displaced persons.

Instead, her wrath is turned, even more than against the destruction, against the new construction that usually takes its place: housing "projects". Public housing projects in the United States have not turned out to be the cure-all for "crime and delinquency" which their early advocates had promised; in many cases these are worse than in the "slums". Mrs. Jacobs is therefore against any public housing. Here she takes a strangely provincial view, ignoring completely the generally favourable experience of public and semi-public housing in Britain and Europe; and ignoring also the history of housing in the U.S.

In European countries governments have, since World War I, assumed responsibility for housing the urban population by a great variety of policies. The basic housing policy of the United States and of Canada has always been and still is to rely on the "filtering-down" of dwellings vacated by the more affluent to house those of lower income. During the depression the U.S. Congress agreed that some make-work projects be directed toward producing housing — hence the designation "projects". However, in order to make sure that these projects would not disturb the market for acceptable housing, the legislation prescribed first, that only slum dwellers were eligible, and second, that they were only eligible if and as long as their incomes were so low that they could not possibly afford any kind of decent housing. Thus, public housing was from the start burdened with a dual negative tenant selection; those who valued good housing so highly that they skimped on everything else to afford it out of a low income, cannot get in; those that are able and willing to work hard to increase their income also cannot get in or, worse, are thrown out, if and when they succeed.

Those least able to find decent housing are, of course, families with many children, in particular those without a male breadwinner. Quite rightly, they have the highest priority in getting into public housing. But the result is a complete and thoroughly unsound unbalance between the numbers of adults and of children. Children should play under the eyes of adults, preferably in their own backyard. But when public housing is tied to "slum clearance", it must pay the price of the capitalized profits from slum dwellings, which are notoriously high, to clear the land on which it has to build. The resultant high land value forces high density which can be achieved only by building multi-storey elevator buildings, totally unsuited for children.

Any neighbourhood with such handicaps must produce many problems. In order to cope with them and to maintain at least a minimum of external order under the watchful eyes of its many enemies, public housing has resorted to increasing regimentation. This regimentation, together with the lopsided composition of the "project" population, makes many eligible families unwilling to move into public housing. In the United States the problem is further compounded by racial prejudice. Thus a vicious circle is started, often resulting in what Mrs. Jacobs calls an "immured shun".

The reasons for this sad issue of a noble experiment are clearly the handicaps built into the authorizing legislation by those who did not like it in the first place — not to the fact that it was carried out in "projects", meaning large-scale housing developments, nor even to their design, great as are its deficiencies which Mrs. Jacobs justly criticizes.

However, as the basic reason for people living in slums is the gap between their income and the price of decent housing, it has been suggested that the best way to close it would be to supply those in need with "rent certificates", to be honoured by the public treasury. The proponents of this solution overlook that just this has been and is being done by welfare agencies. The main result has been a further subsidy to slum landlords. This points up another aspect of the "housing problem". The market has not been effective in housing as it has been in the field of most consumer's goods, in calling forth the best product possible at the existing level of technology. It is here not the place to discuss the reasons; but world-wide experience over a hundred years has clearly shown that housing built for the purpose of use — whether by governments, co-operatives, trade unions, philanthropists, even by employers — has been far superior to most housing built for the market.

Our mistake consists in confusing the two aspects of the housing problem. Mrs. Jacobs, while she is generally aware of this, has not entirely freed herself from this confusion. She says: "we need subsidies for at least some portion of city dwellings". No, we need subsidies for a portion of city families. And we also need to promote housing projects, big and small, built by whoever is willing and able to build and manage them at decent standards. They should be built, in the main, where they can be built at the least cost, on open land. This does not enter into the purview of Mrs. Jacobs. For all her boldness in discarding conventional thinking, she still thinks in the terms of "city" and "suburbs" as separate worlds, instead of as closely interdependent parts of the same metropolitan unit. She even rejects metropolitan government on grounds valid only against absorption by one overcentralized big city government; though she very ably explains, in considerable detail, the

need for and the possibility of establishing district governments within the larger unit.

Better housing can and must, however, also be created in the older areas of the city, by improvement of the existing housing and environment, with gradual replacement of obsolete structure by new facilities. It is often objected that this cannot be done. It is one of the great merits of Mrs. Jacobs' book that she shows that it has been done; and has been done without help from government or financial institutions.

As mentioned earlier, the gap between income and cost of decent housing can be closed also by raising incomes. Such a rise in real incomes has actually taken place in the United States and Canada during and after the last war. Moreover, war-time restrictions made many consumer goods unavailable so that more savings accumulated in the hands of ordinary people than ever before. They were thus able to improve their housing conditions. Normally, they would have had the choice between two ways of doing this: rehabilitating and improving the houses (or stores) which they occupied; or buying a house in the suburbs and a car. But during and for a number of years after the war both cars and suburban houses were in short supply and so many of them took the first option. Today, per capita real income in the U.S. and Canada is rising only 1% or 2% annually, most people have debts rather than savings and cars and suburban houses are flooding the market. It is therefore risky to base generalizations as to the permanent attractiveness of such areas on the experience of the period from 1940-1960, as Mrs. Jacobs does. Actually many of the younger families are right now moving to the suburbs from Boston's "North End" and from the Chicago "Back-of-the-Yards" area, the only two of her examples inhabited exclusively by "ordinary people".

Despite this caution the fact that "unshunning", as she calls it, has occurred in a number of areas, deserves the greatest attention and raises the question as to the conditions which have made it possible. The book attempts to answer this question. Jane Jacobs believes that the basic cause of slums is "the Great Blight of Dullness" and that the cure is "Diversity". In particular, she considers "lively sidewalks" with many people both on them and watching them from doors and windows as the *sine qua non* of good city life.

The book opens with a long chapter on safety and throughout the book the author returns again and again to this theme. She feels that any place can only be safe from crime if it is constantly watched by many pairs of eyes; every street should be solidly lined with buildings, so that there are no hiding places. It is an appalling comment on American urban civilization that safety should be considered the overriding goal

of city planning. Aristotle remarked that people first come together for security, then stay for the good life. It seems we have come full circle.

In Canadian cities safety from crime is hardly a major concern. Moreover, it is obviously quite impossible to have many people around everywhere all the time. Mrs. Jacobs herself speaks at length about crime in the elevators and hallways of apartment houses. It also occurs in the stairwells of walk-up tenements. Only single-family houses with locked doors might be safe; but in a street lined with such houses the sidewalks would be empty, and crime would come in by the window.

The problem of crime cannot be solved by physical city planning; Mrs. Jacobs' discussions of this point are irrelevant. Fortunately, she has better reasons for lively sidewalks. One is the casual supervision of children; another the opportunity for casual contacts and the emergence of "public figures", primarily small shopkeepers. Mrs. Jacobs believes that only in such conditions can effective political action on the district level be developed. This is hardly borne out by experience; nor is the action of such local groups always beneficial.

Probably her best reason for lively sidewalks is the simple one that they are fun. "People are attracted by people", she says and rightly adds that most planners have ignored this and have thought only of the attraction of "nature", of trees and grass, the sun and the sky. Actually, of course, most people want both, liveliness and quiet, company and solitude, at various times and in various proportions, and different people attach different values to each. It is the great merit of Mrs. Jacobs' book that she explains the values and attractions of liveliness. She has much that is pertinent to say about the destruction of diversity by what I have called "isolationist planning": the tendency of dividing the city up into neat packages of "neighbourhoods" of separate and over-simplified "land use areas", of "single-family" and "apartment" areas. She shows convincingly that continuity, interaction of various functions, and "cross-use", to use her term, are the very essence of the city.

The core of the book is its prescription for the production of "lively city districts". Mrs. Jacobs considers that four conditions are indispensable.

1. High density of people present in a district, as residents, workers, shoppers, or for any other purpose.
2. A mixture of "primary" uses, that is, in addition to residence, industry, private and public offices, and places of entertainment serving all or large parts of the city beyond the district.
3. Short blocks.
4. A mixture of old and new buildings.

This is indeed "an attack on current city planning" on all four counts. To take the last point first: Mrs. Jacobs states quite rightly that a district needs not only "high-yield" stores and services, but also marginal "low yield" establishments, and that these can afford only old buildings; also that a mixture of old and new houses will lead to a natural and close-grained mixture of people of varying incomes. But how is it to be brought about? By definition it is impossible in new districts and every district must start as a new one. Mrs. Jacobs says that many districts remain slums because they could not overcome the "obvious misfortune of being built all at once". She does not say how else you can build. Once a district is built and at the high density and with the continuous frontage which Mrs. Jacobs demands, new buildings can only be built by buying and demolishing old ones. This is economically possible only if the district is extremely attractive. Thus, a symptom and result of "success" is stipulated as its cause and condition. Thus Mrs. Jacobs' whole argument might be dismissed as circular reasoning; however, it is worthwhile to consider shortly her other three points.

While it is true that densities can be too low as well as too high and that high densities have advantages as well as faults, the reasons for open space around buildings are too numerous and weighty to be disregarded. Distance between buildings is needed for light, air and sunshine, for cooling breezes, for privacy from sight, sound, and smells. Open space at ground level is needed to grow trees, for children to play and adults to sit — and for cars to park. Mrs. Jacobs is right in demanding that people move in the city by transit rather than by private car (though she completely fails to understand the policies which are required to eliminate unnecessary and retain necessary traffic). But this does not eliminate the universal desire to own a car for travel on weekends, during holidays, and for visits outside the inner city area. Aside from the few people who manage to find a curb space for overnight parking, only two kinds of people can live in Greenwich Village: those so poor, or otherwise handicapped that they cannot own cars, and those so rich that they can pay \$40 a month for a space in a commercial garage.

Mrs. Jacobs demands densities of 100-200 dwelling units per net acre. She gives the density of Le Corbusier's "Radiant City" (which she rejects, rightly) as 1200 dwelling units per net acre; actually it works out at about 120. She gives the density of the Boston "North End" as 275. A minute's calculation would have shown her that this would require an average height of 6 stories; and few, if any, buildings there have more than five. The Boston City Planning Commission from whom she obtained the figure over the telephone, has long ago discovered the error; in reality the density is only little more than half as high. It

is strange indeed that somebody who writes scores of pages on densities — and is the wife of an architect — should be so completely unable to visualize densities in terms of three-dimensional reality.

The density of the Boston "North End" is still, of course, unusually high. It is achieved only by a ground coverage which even Mrs. Jacobs considers excessive; and made tolerable because it is surrounded on three sides by the open space of the Atlantic Ocean and of abandoned piers along its shores — not tolerable enough to hold the one-fifth of its population which has left it during the last 10 years.

The North End, like Greenwich Village, enjoys the attraction of a concentration of interesting little stores and restaurants. In both cases this is possible because they are close enough to the centre to be easily accessible from all parts of the city; and in both cases this concentration developed historically because they were the original location of and have remained the centre of two special groups now spread all over the city and beyond: artists and writers in the "Village" and Italians in the North End.

The peculiar richness and variety of their stores and restaurants can therefore not be duplicated in the vast "gray areas" which spread at considerable distances from the centre and represent the bulk of the "blighted areas". These districts can only contain the establishments which can be supported by their own purchasing power — or what is left of it after the department stores, the supermarkets and the car dealers have taken the lion's share. These will be mostly run-of-the-mill and inevitably rather thinly spread, even with high densities.

It is therefore surprising that Mrs. Jacobs wants to spread them even thinner by adding to the length of street fronts. In order to obtain "short blocks" she proposes to punch streets through the middle of long ones. This is supposed to encourage "cross-use" of streets and thereby promote vitality.

The most unorthodox of Mrs. Jacobs' four points is her advocacy of a mixture of industry and residence. Zoning has been obsessed with the notion that only sameness can "protect property values". This protection was and is the reason for zoning. Zoning is not planning; but in trying to use this available, but basically unsuitable tool for planning purposes, planners have far too long adopted its obsession against mixing uses or types of buildings. Mrs. Jacobs is right in stating that certain industries, if they are not too big or too numerous, can be an asset rather than a detriment to a residential area. But industry is dynamic, and only continuous control can prevent the asset to become a nuisance. The "size zoning" which she proposes is quite inadequate.

The inadequacy of the four points put forward by the author does, however, not invalidate her basic thesis that old city areas are not "cancerous blight" but valuable and irreplaceable assets; that they should not be "cleared" but improved by adding to them what is lacking. She refuses to recognize that one of the elements lacking is open space, not only within the blocks, but also in schoolyards and small parks and playgrounds. But she is right in advocating the addition of places of work, offices and selected factories or workshops, of places of entertainment, and the insertion of civic and cultural buildings in focal points in "ordinary city" environment, instead of their isolation in lifeless "civic centres" and "cultural centres". This will involve a good deal of demolition; and the improvement of the area will require rehabilitation of most of the dwellings. If this is not to result in the displacement of most of the present inhabitants, rents will have to be kept low by public subsidies. This will be costly, but far less so than the present policy of "clearance and redevelopment".

Mrs. Jacobs is right in emphasizing that the transformation must be gradual to preserve the continuity of the social fabric, the complexity of which she has brilliantly analyzed. In a perceptive chapter on "the self-destruction of diversity" she describes the destructive impact of "cataclysmic money". It is therefore strange that she puts her main reliance on extension of credit facilities to property owners. Necessary as these are, they may do as much harm as good if not guided by a plan for the step-by-step transformation of the area. Implementation of such a plan will hardly be possible without public ownership. I have for many years advocated that redevelopment powers be used for this purpose. That is a vastly more difficult task than clearing an area from all existing life and planning something else on a *tabula rasa*. It will require continuing painstakingly detailed work, unending patience and most of all that sensitive understanding of the life of human beings which Mrs. Jacobs shows in her discoveries of aspects of city life which planners and sociologists have overlooked.

This impassioned commitment is the great strength of this strange and remarkable book. It is also its weakness because it has carried away its author into many mis-statements which may mislead the uninformed and may cause the informed to refuse to take the book as seriously as it deserves. It is a profoundly thought-provoking book which should be read and pondered by everyone concerned with the future of our cities.

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